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Exploring Students' Perspectives on Task-Based Activities in Their English Learning

[1*]Desta Rizki Iza Putri, [2]Santi Farmasari, [3]Desi Herayana

[1,2,3] English Education Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, University of Mataram, Indonesia

Corresponding Author e-mail: destarzky@gmail.com

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Abstract

This qualitative exploratory study examines Grade X students' perspectives on learning English through task-based activities at SMK Ondak Jaya, East Lombok, Indonesia. Although task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been widely studied, little is known about vocational high school students' cognitive, emotional, and social perspectives, especially when perceived development is distinguished from objectively measured proficiency. This study addresses that gap by exploring students' views on the implementation of task-based activities, their perceived benefits and challenges, and their perceived English language development. Ten Grade X students were purposively selected. Data were collected through a ten-item open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews conducted in Indonesian, each lasting 10–15 minutes; responses were transcribed, translated, and analyzed thematically. The findings show varied cognitive responses: teacher explanations and examples clarified tasks for some students, while others reported confusion or difficulty responding. Emotionally, peer work generated comfort and enjoyment, but public speaking triggered shyness and low confidence. Socially, tasks enabled collaboration and peer assistance, although participation was uneven. Students perceived benefits in vocabulary learning, sentence construction, English practice, and peer learning, while challenges included limited vocabulary, unclear task demands, shyness, and unequal participation. Students associated the activities with perceived language development, but no pre-test or post-test was used, so the findings are not evidence of measured proficiency gains. The study highlights clear instructions, examples, vocabulary scaffolding, structured group roles, and gradual speaking opportunities. Its novelty lies in integrating three perspective dimensions and distinguishing perceived development from measured achievement in a vocational school context.

Keywords: *Task-Based Language Teaching, students' perspectives, English learning, vocational high school*.

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INTRODUCTION

English language learning plays an important role in developing students' communication skills and helping them access information in academic and real-life contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, however, students may have limited opportunities to use English meaningfully during classroom learning (Littlewood, 2004). When learning focuses mainly on explanation and language forms, some students may become hesitant to participate or may find it difficult to apply what they have learned in communication.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) places meaningful tasks at the center of language learning (Prabhu, 1987; Nunan, 2004). Through tasks, students use language to achieve a goal, exchange information, express ideas, or complete an activity. Nunan (2004), Long (2015), and Ellis et al. (2020) explain that tasks create opportunities for learners to use language for meaning-focused purposes. In this way, task-based activities can connect language learning with communication rather than limiting learning to the memorization of linguistic forms (Willis, 1996; Bygate et al., 2001).

At SMK Ondak Jaya, Grade X English lessons include activities such as oral presentations, classroom conversations, sentence construction, and other communicative assignments. Preliminary information obtained through communication with the English teacher indicated that these activities were part of classroom learning. Nevertheless, students did not always respond in the same way. Some participated actively, while others were hesitant to express ideas, had difficulty understanding tasks, or experienced limited confidence when using English. This context makes it important to understand how students themselves perceive task-based activities, particularly because vocational high school students' perspectives remain underrepresented in TBLT research (Lestari et al., 2025).

Students' perspectives are relevant because learning involves more than the completion of classroom tasks (Mawaddah, 2025). Students also interpret instructions, experience emotions, and interact with teachers and peers during the learning process (Dörnyei, 2007). From a cognitive perspective, students may differ in how they understand a task and recognize its purpose. Emotionally, students may feel interested, comfortable, shy, or anxious (Arnold & Brown, 1999). Socially, they may collaborate with classmates, ask for help, or remain less involved (van Lier, 2004; Mercer & Howe, 2012). These dimensions are interconnected and can shape how students engage with task-based learning.

Previous studies have discussed both the benefits and challenges of TBLT. Afiah (2021) describes task-based teaching as a way to encourage participation in speaking activities. Putri and Nugraha (2022) report that task-based activities can support vocabulary learning and confidence, although students may still experience difficulties with vocabulary and language structure. Hapsari et al. (2020) also show that experiences of task-based learning can vary according to students and learning contexts. Ji (2017) further notes that TBLT in Asian EFL classrooms may face challenges related to language limitations, task familiarity, and classroom participation. These studies suggest that task-based learning offers opportunities for language use, but students' experiences should not be assumed to be uniform (Andiansyah et al., 2025).

However, previous studies have tended to focus on speaking performance, vocabulary outcomes, or teacher experiences. They have not sufficiently integrated students' cognitive, emotional, and social perspectives in a vocational high school context, and they have not clearly distinguished students' perceived development from objectively measured language improvement. This study addresses that gap by examining Grade X students' perspectives at SMK Ondak Jaya. Its novelty lies in combining three perspective dimensions—cognitive, emotional, and social—with an explicit analysis of perceived benefits, challenges, and perceived English development, while acknowledging the absence of objective proficiency measures.

The selection of SMK Ondak Jaya and Grade X students was based on three considerations. First, Grade X students were beginning to adapt to vocational high school English learning, in which communicative tasks are used alongside practical subject matter. Second, the school context offered access to students who had experienced task-based activities in English lessons. Third, vocational high school students' voices are rarely represented in TBLT research, although their learning needs are closely related to future workplace communication.

This study is significant for teachers because it provides information about the kinds of support students need during task completion. For students, it offers a space to articulate their learning experiences. For the school, it can inform decisions about classroom support and teacher development. For future researchers, it provides a basis for further studies involving more schools, classroom observations, teacher perspectives, and objective measures of language development.

Based on this context, the present study explores Grade X students' perspectives on task-based activities in their English learning at SMK Ondak Jaya. Specifically, it examines students' perspectives on the implementation of task-based activities, the benefits and challenges they perceive, and their views of English language development through these activities. The study focuses on students' reported perspectives and does not seek to measure language proficiency gains objectively.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with an exploratory design to gain an in-depth understanding of Grade X students' perspectives on learning English through task-based activities. An exploratory design was chosen because the study aimed to examine participants' experiences and interpretations when little prior research had addressed the specific vocational school context and the integration of cognitive, emotional, and social perspectives. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study focused on participants' views, interpretations, feelings, and learning experiences in their classroom context (Cristancho et al., 2018). The research was conducted at SMK Ondak Jaya, a vocational high school in East Lombok, Indonesia.

The participants were ten Grade X students who had participated in English lessons involving task-based activities. They were selected purposively based on their experience with the learning activities and their willingness to participate. To protect their privacy, participants are identified by codes S1 to S10 rather than by their real names.

Data were collected through two instruments: an open-ended survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire consisted of ten open-ended questions and was used to gather students' initial views, experiences, and feelings regarding task-based activities. The questions addressed their understanding of task-based learning, perceived benefits and challenges, motivation, classroom interaction, and suggestions for improving the activities. The questionnaire was organized around cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of students' perspectives. The questionnaire was administered in one classroom session of approximately 30 minutes after the researcher explained the purpose of the study and obtained students' consent.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the ten selected students to explore their questionnaire responses in greater depth. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in Indonesian and audio-recorded with participants' permission. Each interview lasted approximately 10–15 minutes. The interviews were scheduled on separate days outside regular instructional time to avoid disrupting lessons. Interview questions addressed students' views of the implementation of task-based activities, their experiences during tasks, the benefits and challenges they encountered, and the development of English skills they perceived.

All data were collected in Indonesian to allow participants to express their views comfortably. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts and open-ended questionnaire responses were then translated into English for reporting. To support accuracy, the researcher compared the translations with the original Indonesian expressions and consulted the supervising lecturers when ambiguous terms or culturally specific expressions were found.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the general procedures described by Braun and Clarke (2022). First, questionnaire responses and interview transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the data. Second, meaningful statements relevant to the research questions were identified and assigned initial codes. Third, codes with similar meanings were compared and grouped into categories. Fourth, categories were reviewed and refined by checking whether they were internally coherent and distinct from one another. Fifth, categories were organized into themes and subthemes representing students' perspectives on task-based learning. Finally, themes were defined and named, and illustrative quotations were selected. Questionnaire and interview data were compared to develop a fuller understanding of recurring patterns and differences in students' responses. The coding process focused on the three dimensions of perspective—cognitive, emotional, and social—as well as perceived benefits, challenges, and perceived English development. A coding matrix was used to record participant codes, categories, themes, and illustrative excerpts.

Trustworthiness was addressed through the use of two data sources, a description of the research context and procedures, documentation of the research process, and attention to whether interpretations were supported by the collected data. The use of questionnaire and interview data allowed for triangulation of data sources. Member checking was conducted informally by asking participants to confirm whether the researcher's summary of their responses reflected their intended meanings. Ethical procedures included obtaining permission from the school, explaining the purpose and procedures of the study to participants, making participation voluntary, obtaining permission to record interviews, and using participant codes to maintain confidentiality.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Students' Cognitive Perspectives on Task-Based Activities

The findings show that students differed in how easily they understood task-based activities and their purposes. Some students explained that the teacher's explanations helped them understand what they were expected to do. Examples provided before or during a task could also make the instructions clearer. In contrast,

some students found it difficult to respond when they were unsure about the task or did not fully understand what was being asked.

Students' explanations of the purpose of task-based activities also varied. Some associated the activities with learning English, practicing language, or improving their ability to make sentences, while others were less certain about the purpose. This suggests that students may recognize practical benefits even when they cannot clearly describe the pedagogical aim of a task.

These findings relate to the meaning-focused orientation of TBLT, in which learners use language to achieve a task goal (Nunan, 2004; Ellis et al., 2020). However, meaningful tasks require students to understand instructions and expectations. As Long (2015) and Littlewood (2004) argue, task implementation depends not only on task design but also on how clearly the task is presented and supported. Clear explanations, examples, and appropriate support can help students engage with tasks, particularly when they have limited vocabulary or are unfamiliar with the activity.

Students' Emotional Responses to Task-Based Activities

Students reported different emotional responses during task-based English learning. Several described feeling happy or more comfortable when they could complete activities with friends. Peer support appeared to make it easier for some students to participate, share ideas, and work through a task. Other students reported feeling shy or less confident when they had to speak English in front of the class.

These findings indicate that positive feelings and hesitation can coexist in the same learning context. Working with peers may reduce the pressure of participating alone, while speaking publicly can remain challenging for students who are concerned about making mistakes or who feel that their English resources are limited. Arnold and Brown (1999) emphasize the relevance of affective factors in language learning. Therefore, students' emotional responses should be considered when teachers plan how tasks are introduced and completed.

Teachers may support students by allowing them to rehearse ideas in pairs or small groups before sharing them with the whole class. Such support does not remove the need to practice speaking, but it can provide a more gradual path toward participation for students who feel hesitant.

Social Interaction, Collaboration, and Participation

Task-based activities provided opportunities for students to interact with classmates, discuss task requirements, exchange ideas, and help one another. Some students felt more able to participate when working with peers. These responses suggest that students experienced task-based learning not only as an individual activity but also as a social process in which classmates could provide assistance and encouragement.

However, participation was not always equal. Some students were more active in discussions and task completion, whereas others tended to remain quiet or contribute less. Thus, group work created opportunities for interaction but did not automatically ensure that every student participated to the same extent.

This pattern is consistent with the view that language learning is connected to social interaction and the learning environment (van Lier, 2004; Mercer & Howe, 2012). Afiah (2021) also discusses the potential of task-based teaching to encourage

classroom participation. At the same time, the differences found in this study suggest that teachers may need to structure group tasks carefully, clarify each member's role, and provide opportunities for quieter students to contribute.

Perceived Benefits of Task-Based Activities

Students identified several benefits of task-based activities, including learning new vocabulary, practicing sentence construction, having opportunities to use English, and learning with classmates. Vocabulary learning was described as one outcome of encountering and using English in the context of a classroom task. Students also perceived sentence-making and conversation activities as opportunities to practice the language rather than only listen to explanations.

These perceived benefits are consistent with the view that tasks can encourage learners to use language to achieve communicative goals (Amrullah, 2015; Ellis et al., 2020). Putri and Nugraha (2022) similarly discuss vocabulary-related benefits of task-based learning. Peer learning was another perceived benefit: students could ask friends for help, explain ideas to each other, or work together to complete an activity. Such interaction may make tasks more accessible and provide additional opportunities to use English.

Challenges Experienced by Students

Despite these benefits, students reported challenges during task-based learning. Limited vocabulary made it difficult for some students to express ideas or respond in English. Some also experienced confusion when they did not understand task instructions or were unsure how to answer. Teacher explanations and examples were identified as useful support when students encountered these difficulties.

Shyness and lack of confidence were additional challenges, particularly when students were asked to speak in front of the class. Some students appeared more comfortable participating with friends than speaking to the whole class. In addition, uneven participation meant that some students contributed less during group activities.

These challenges are comparable to issues discussed by Ji (2017) and Putri and Nugraha (2022), including language limitations and difficulties during task completion. The findings also support Skehan's (1998) view that task performance is influenced by cognitive demands, language resources, and learners' attention. When vocabulary and task demands exceed students' current resources, students may focus on coping with the task rather than on using language confidently. The findings suggest that task-based activities should be accompanied by appropriate scaffolding. Teachers can introduce relevant vocabulary, give clear instructions, demonstrate an example, and check students' understanding before asking them to complete a task. Pair and small-group work may also provide support for students who feel less confident.

Students' Perceived Development of English Language Skills

Students perceived that task-based activities gave them opportunities to learn vocabulary, construct sentences, and practice using English. Their accounts suggest that they associated repeated participation in classroom tasks with becoming more familiar with English and having more chances to apply what they had learned.

These findings must be interpreted as students' perceived development. The study did not use pre-test and post-test scores or another objective measure of English proficiency. Therefore, the data cannot establish that students' language proficiency increased as a measurable result of task-based activities. Rather, the findings show how students understood the contribution of the activities to their own learning.

Taken together, the findings extend previous research by showing that benefits and challenges of TBLT coexist in the same classroom. Afiah (2021) and Putri and Nugraha (2022) emphasize participation and vocabulary benefits, while Ji (2017) highlights implementation challenges. This study shows that vocational high school students may value peer collaboration and vocabulary practice while still experiencing confusion, shyness, and unequal participation. The variation across students may be explained by differences in vocabulary size, prior English learning experience, confidence, task type, group composition, and the amount of teacher scaffolding. These factors should be considered when interpreting students' perspectives and when designing task-based lessons.

This study has several limitations. It involved only ten students from one vocational high school, so the findings are contextual and should not be generalized to all vocational high school students. The data were based on students' self-reported perspectives, and no classroom observation was conducted. In addition, the study did not use pre-test and post-test measures, so it cannot make claims about objectively measured language improvement. Future research should involve more participants and schools, include classroom observations and teacher perspectives, and use objective measures if language development is to be examined.

The findings have practical implications. Teachers should use clear instructions, relevant examples, vocabulary pre-teaching, and comprehension checks before task completion. Teachers can also implement a pre-task, during-task, and post-task sequence (Willis, 1996), assign group roles, and provide pair rehearsal before whole-class speaking. The school can support teacher professional development on task-based instruction and formative feedback. For students, the findings suggest the importance of asking for clarification and using peer collaboration as a learning resource.

CONCLUSION

This study explored Grade X students' perspectives on learning English through task-based activities at SMK Ondak Jaya and addressed three research questions. In relation to the first research question, students' perspectives on implementation varied across cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. Cognitively, explanations and examples helped some students understand tasks, although others experienced confusion or difficulty responding. Emotionally, some students enjoyed learning with friends, while others felt shy or less confident when speaking English in front of the class. Socially, task-based activities created opportunities for interaction and collaboration, but participation was not always equal.

In relation to the second research question, students perceived benefits including new vocabulary, sentence construction, opportunities to practice English, and learning with peers. The challenges they described included limited vocabulary, difficulty understanding tasks, shyness, and uneven participation. In relation to the

third research question, students perceived that the activities contributed to their English language development; however, because no objective proficiency measures were used, these findings should not be interpreted as evidence of measured improvement.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of clear task instructions, relevant examples, supportive peer work, vocabulary scaffolding, structured group roles, and purposeful ways to involve all students. Task-based activities can provide meaningful opportunities to use English, but students may need different kinds of support to participate and benefit from them. The study contributes to TBLT research by integrating cognitive, emotional, and social perspectives and by distinguishing perceived development from measured achievement in a vocational high school context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

English teachers are encouraged to design task-based activities that suit students' language abilities and vocational learning context. Clear instructions, examples, and relevant vocabulary may help students understand what they need to do. Teachers can also use pair and small-group tasks before whole-class presentations and structure group roles to encourage more balanced participation. Teachers should also check students' understanding before task completion and provide gradual speaking opportunities for students who lack confidence.

Students are encouraged to take part in task-based activities, ask for clarification when instructions are unclear, and use peer collaboration as an opportunity to practice English. Future researchers may involve students from more than one vocational school, include classroom observations or teachers' perspectives, and use pre-test and post-test measures if the purpose is to investigate language development objectively. Future research may also examine how task types, group composition, vocabulary support, and teacher scaffolding influence students' participation and perceived learning.

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